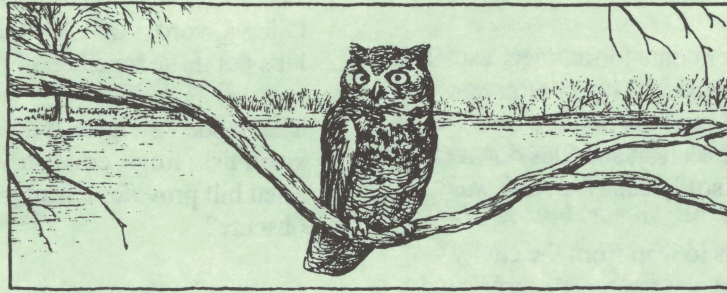


STILLMAN NEWSLETTER



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DUCKS IN TREES

-- Mark Spreyer

When most people think of ducks, they probably think of birds that quack and live on water. Well, most ducks don't quack and some nest in trees! Let's take a close look at two of our local tree ducks, both of which have nested at Stillman, the wood duck and hooded merganser.

Wood Duck (*Aix sponsa*)

The wood duck is one of the most beautiful species of waterfowl to be found on the planet. The male, in particular, is a spectacular bird. In the spring, he has an iridescent green and purple crested head, red eyes, white throat, and burgundy breast. The female, who also sports a crested head, has a distinctive white patch around the eye.



Gillian Kohler

When perched on a branch or floating high on the water, the drake's resplendent colors are quite visible. I say floating high since wood ducks are more buoyant than other ducks.

Paddling tall suits this duck fine since most of its diet is made up of seeds (including acorns) and aquatic plants. It does not need to dive for dinner.

Should you come upon a group of woodies that suddenly take flight, you will probably hear their wings whistling by. You might also detect a distinct squealing *oo-eek, oo-eek* call. These high-intensity vocalizations are made by the hens and used to keep in contact with the other ducks.

Filling Cavities

Unlike some water birds, such as herons, that build stick nests in trees, wood ducks use cavities. Since they aren't equipped to excavate their own holes, they use pre-existing openings.

The majority of suitable nest cavities develop when large branches break, leading to the development of heart rot in the tree's trunk. Types of trees that provide such cavities include elm, ash, oak, maple, aspen, and sycamore. The trees should be at least a foot in diameter at breast height although nests are more common in larger trees.

Selecting the right cavity is done, not surprisingly, by the hen. The drake keeps her company, however. Unless she simply returns to last year's nest, the search starts early in the morning and can last for hours.

Ideally, the cavity should be 30 feet or more above the ground although lower ones are often used. The entrance is usually between 10 and 19 square inches while the depth of the cavity averages just under two feet. These birds will also use nest boxes. Plans are available at various websites including woodducksociety.com

Geronimo!

Ducklings are precocial which means that their eyes are open and they are covered with downy feathers as soon as they hatch. By the end of their first day, the ducklings are

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ready to walk, climb, and feed themselves. You could say that they hit the ground running which is *exactly* what they do!

The hen's brood, numbering from nine to fourteen, usually leave in the morning, about twenty-four hours after hatching. Of course, they don't jump until the hen has scanned the area for trouble. If the coast is clear, she flies down to the ground or water below and softly calls *kuk, kuk, kuk*.

This is the cue for the ducklings to leap from the cavity. Given the heights they fall from, the young are surprisingly resilient, literally bouncing off the ground. Once on terra firma, they can have quite a hike ahead of them. Some nest trees are up to a mile away from the nearest water.

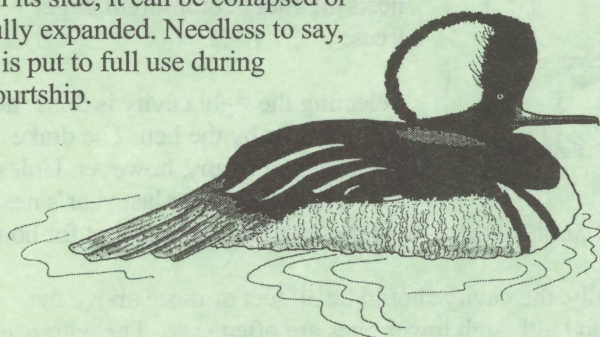
Interesting thing, not every little bird in the duckling parade is the offspring of the duck that incubated it (more on this later).

Hooded Merganser (*Lophodytes cucullatus*)

I have to confess. The wood duck is a bit gaudy for me. When it comes to the best looking North American duck, the stylish black-and-white hooded merganser wins hands down.

As with the wood ducks, both males and females sport a crest on their heads. Unlike the wood ducks, the merganser drake knows how to work his.

His crest is bright white edged in black. Like a fan laying on its side, it can be collapsed or fully expanded. Needless to say, it is put to full use during courtship.



Cruising the Sand Bars

The male merganser's elaborate courtship behaviors include crest-raising, head-shaking, turn-the-back-of-the-head, upward-stretch, head-pumping, and, last but not least, ritualized drinking. In order to witness these behaviors, you don't have to have live near a lake, just check out some of the bars in Wrigleyville on a Saturday night.

Should you want to watch merganser courtship displays at Stillman, keep late February and early March open for a visit to the nature center. The hooded mergansers arrive almost as soon as the ice breaks up. In some years, the mergansers have been strutting their stuff while part of the lake was still covered with ice.

Low Riders

Merganser comes from the Latin meaning "diving goose." The French know it as *bec-de-scie* or "saw-beak." The Ojibwa word is *ah-zig* which translates as "obscure." Now, let's put these together.

The hooded merganser does dive for prey which includes small fish, frogs, crayfish, and aquatic insects. Its serrated bill provides a firm grasp on its slippery meals. But, obscure?

Yes. Unlike the wood duck, the hooded merganser often sits low, which it can do by compressing the air sacs in its body and slowly submerging. Given that it searches for prey with its eyes, riding low makes sense.

Are You My Mother?

Although its eyes are well-adapted for focusing on underwater prey, they don't appear to be useful in identifying individual offspring.

Like the wood duck, the merganser hen scouts out possible nest cavities. She gives a soft guttural call to her ducklings when it is safe to jump from the nest. Finally, the female merganser leads a parade of ten to twelve precocial ducklings, some of which may not be hers.

This brood parasitism, as it's called, can be wood duck eggs in a hooded merganser nest or vice versa. It can also be an egg from a hen of the same species that is dumped in another bird's nest.

Nest box studies indicate that the frequency of egg dumping is not related to the availability but rather the visibility of boxes. That is to say, a box mounted on a post over open water is more likely to be parasitized than one hidden back in the woods.

The good news is that for wood ducks, parasitism has few adverse effects while for hooded mergansers, the effects are largely unknown.

Cool & Comical

Whether it is admiring a colorful male wood duck perched in a tree or being entertained by the vigorous courtship displays of hooded mergansers, duck watching is one of the joys of springtime. It brings to mind the opening lines of *Ducks*, a poem by F.W. Harvey:

From troubles of the world
I turn to ducks,
Beautiful comical things
Sleeping or curled
Their heads beneath white wings
By water cool,
Or finding curious things
To eat in various mucks
Beneath the pool...

PROGRAMS

WOODCOCK WATCHES

In past years, the woodcocks have put on quite a show. Hopefully, the weather will cooperate and we'll have another good nuptial display this year. Bring your binoculars and come join the fun!

Date: Saturdays, March 21 & 28
Time: 6:30PM
Fee: None
Age: 8 years and up

BIRD BANDING

Watch Mark Spreyer, a licensed bird bander, measure, weigh and record data about our resident and migratory birds. Birds are not caught in a predictable manner, so come prepared to hike the trails. With luck, you'll see a bird in the hand and two in the bush. If it is raining, the banding open house will be cancelled.

Date: Sundays, April 5 & May 3
Time: 9:00AM to Noon
Fee: None
Age: 8 years and up



BIRDING 101

There are approximately 70 million bird watchers in the U.S. If you are curious about what these folks are up to, then this is the class for you. We'll cover the basics of bird identification and introduce you to the tools of the trade such as binoculars and field guides.

With expert guides, you'll get to practice your new skills as we search Stillman's varied habitats for resident and migratory birds. **Advanced registration is required!** For a registration form, please go to: stillmannnc.org

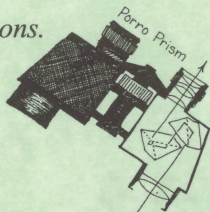
Date/Time: Friday, April 17, 6:30 - 8:30PM
and Saturday, April 18, 8:00 - 11:00AM
Member's Fee: \$10.00
Non-member's Fee: \$15.00
Suggested Reading: *Pete Dunne on Bird Watching*
by Pete Dunne. © 2003

SUNDAY MORNING BIRD WALKS

Mark Spreyer will lead a morning bird walk. Migration will be under way and you never know what we might find. Binoculars and field guides are a must. If you don't have any, don't worry, Stillman does.

Please call 428-OWLS to make reservations.

Date: Sundays, April 19 & 26
Time: 8:00AM
Fee: None
Age: 8 years and up



FLYING WILD: A Workshop for Educators

Flying WILD is an exciting new program that provides interactive activities to teach students about migratory birds and their conservation. Topics covered include basic bird biology, identification, and ecology.



Who should attend? Educators, nature center staff, and youth group leaders. Workshop participants will receive the 366-page manual, *Flying WILD: An Educator's Guide to Celebrating Birds*.

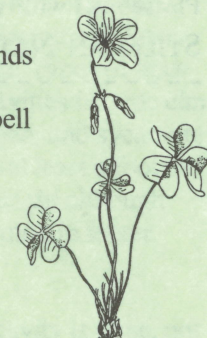
Advanced registration is required! For more information and a registration form, please go to: stillmannnc.org

Date: Friday, April 24
Time: 10:00AM - 2:00PM
Fee: \$20/person (includes light lunch)
Instructor: Cyndi Duda, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

WILDFLOWER WALKS

Join us as we explore Stillman's woodlands in search of ephemeral beauties such as white trillium, may-apple, Virginia bluebell and jack-in-the-pulpit. Bring your camera!

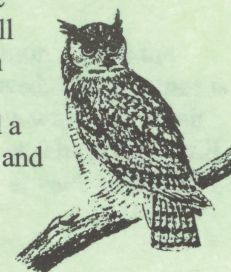
Dates: Sundays, May 3 & 10
Time: 2:00PM
Fee: None
Age: 10 years and up



DON'T MISS RAPTOR SUNDAY!

Now's your chance to meet the great horned, barn, and screech owls plus a peregrine falcon and broad-winged hawk. We will bring the birds out so you can see them up close. Kids will have a chance to dissect owl pellets. Bring a camera and a friend! Drop by anytime between 1:00 and 3:00 in the afternoon.

Dates: Sunday, May 17
Time: 1:00 - 3:00 PM
Fee: \$5/car



Please note that the Stillman Nature Center is also available, by reservation, during the week to school classes. For more information just call or email us at stillnc@wildblue.net.

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If you aren't already a member, please consider joining us.

☐ Yes, I'd like to become or continue as a member of the Stillman Nature Center.
I enclose my tax deductible contribution of \$_____.

☐ I'd like to help as a volunteer with programs or land management at the Stillman Nature Center, please call me.

☐ Please send a gift membership from _____ to the name and address listed below.

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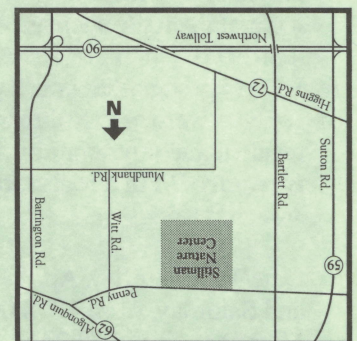
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